Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 21 Number 1 January 2024

FIELD TRIP-1: Sunday, 7th January 2024, 6.30AM: Manjeera WLS. Meeting Points: IKEA Madhapur, 5.00AM; Allwyn Crossroads Foot Overbridge, 5.15AM; BHEL Bus Stop, 5.30AM; Taj Dhaba, Muthangi, 5.45AM. Trip Coordinator(s): Sathwik Reddy (Mobile: 99858-07186)

Manjeera Wildlife Sanctuary and Reservoir is a man-made reservoir that provides drinking water to Hyderabad and Secunderabad. It has nine small islands that host a variety of habitats and species. The sanctuary is home to more than 70 species of birds, including large flocks of Common Teal, Cotton Pygmy-goose, Ruddy Shelduck, Painted Stork, Eurasian Coot, Black-crowned Night Heron, and many more. Also, Manjeera Dam and the surrounding fields are good viewing points for finches, wagtails, ibises, munias and more. The area is also home to a various species of birds: look out for Watercock, Bluethroat, Small Minivet, Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Rain Quail, Jungle Bush Quail, Rock Bush Quail, Barred Buttonquail, Painted Francolin, Baya Weaver, Black-breasted Weaver, Tricoloured Munia, Black-headed Bunting, Red-headed Bunting etc.

This will be a half-day trip, so carry adequate water and breakfast/snacks, and protective gear if required.

FIELD TRIP-2: Sunday, 21st January 2024, 7.00AM: Pocharam Lake. Meeting Point(s): Apollo Pharmacy, Miyapur-Bolaram Road, Near Miyapur Cross Roads, 05:20AM; opposite Dindigul Air Force Station, Hyderabad-Narsapur Road, 06:00AM. Trip Coordinator(s): Sathwik Reddy (Mobile: 99858-07186)

Pocharam Lake is a part of the Pocharam Wildlife Sanctuary, a former hunting ground of the Nizam that was declared a wildlife sanctuary in the early 20th century. The sanctuary, which is a dry deciduous forest with small ponds and streams, is home to a wide variety of plant and animal species. The lake was formed by damming the Allair river, a tributary of the Manjeera river, between 1916 and 1922. The lake and its surroundings provide a unique habitat for many water birds, such as Asian Openbill, Bar-headed Goose, Ruddy Shelduck, Greater Flamingo, Greater Painted-snipe, Pin-tailed Snipe etc. Also watch out for Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff, Pacific Golden-Plover, and Black-bellied Tern.

The sanctuary also has a variety of plant species, ranging from teak, bamboo and pterocarpus to exotic wildflowers that bloom in different seasons. The lake is a popular destination for birdwatchers and nature lovers, as it offers a glimpse of the rich biodiversity of the region.

Both trips are also a part of the **Asian Waterbird Census (AWC)**, a citizen science programme that monitors the status of waterbirds and wetlands across Asia and Australasia every January. The AWC is coordinated by Wetlands International and contributes to the conservation and management of wetlands and waterbirds at local, national, and international levels.

This trip will be full-day trip, and breakfast/lunch options are minimal, so carry breakfast, lunch and enough water to keep yourselves hydrated. Also carry protective gear if required.

Covid protocols will be followed; please ensure you wear masks, carry a sanitiser and maintain social distancing. Non-members are most welcome; however, they are requested to contribute Rs. 100/- per person to the Deccan Birders kitty. New Deccan Birders hats and caps will be available for purchase; please come prepared!

EXPLORING THE WESTERN GHATS
Trip Report: Sangli, Maharashtra, December 23-24, 2023

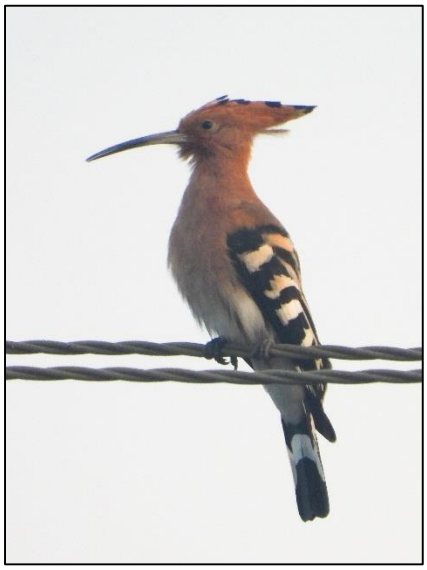
Text: Vijaya & Dhiraj Kaveri; Photos: Vijaya Kaveri

A view of Bhigwan Bird Sanctuary, with a flock of Godwits in the foreground

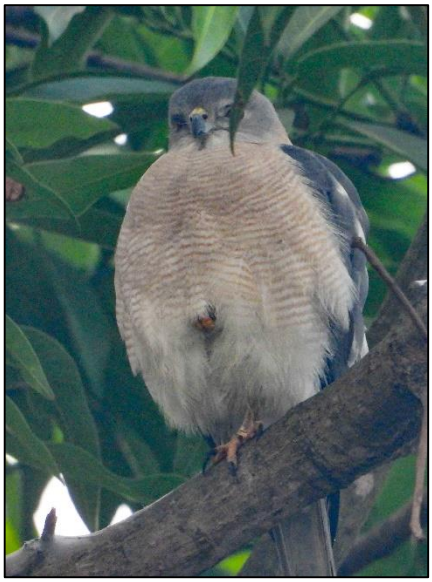
Our desire to extend our birding expeditions through learning and understanding different places and habitats took us to Sangli, Maharashtra, as part of 36th Maharashtra Pakshimitra Sammelan (Annual Birders Conference) on 23rd and 24th December 2023. The event was organized by local birding research group Birdsong who are specializing in documenting and publishing sounds of birds found in Sangli District. The two-day conference had presentations from academicians, experts in the birding community and wildlife conservationists. Apart from the formal program we had an early morning birding trip to Krishna River Bank and Shantiniketan Lok Vidyapeeth School, both of which are birding hotspots.

Krishna River Bank

It was a foggy and breezy early morning when we reached the ghats of the Krishna River a few kilometres from the city. As we entered, we were welcomed by the pleasant sights of an Indian Grey Hornbill pair, Eurasian Hoopoe, Shikra and Asian Green Bee-eaters. Due to poor visibility we could not get clean pictures, though.



Eurasian Hoopoe



Shikra

Walking down towards the riverbank, we spotted a couple of Long-tailed Shrikes which gave us enough time to take pics.

Long-tailed Shrike

Once we reached the edge of the river, we were all mesmerized by the river view and the sea of water birds foraging, soaring and basking. Everyone got busy identifying the birds and taking some good pics.

Ruddy Shelduck

Ruff

Black-winged Stilt

Eurasian Marsh Harrier

Green Sandpiper

We could spot Painted Stork, Asian Woolly-necked Stork, Pied Kingfisher, Ruddy Shelduck, Northern Pintail, Black-winged Stilt, Little Cormorant, Indian Spot-billed Duck, Little Ringed Plover, Ruff, Common, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Eurasian Spoonbill, etc.

Shantiniketan Lok Vidyapeeth School

Indian Grey Hornbill

Spotted Owlet

This school was the venue of the two-day conference. It is a beautiful campus with lots of greenery. We just took a small walk around the campus and were pleasantly surprised to see Indian Grey Hornbill, Spotted Owlet, 3 varieties of Wagtails (Western Yellow, White and Grey Wagtail), Plum-headed Parakeets etc.

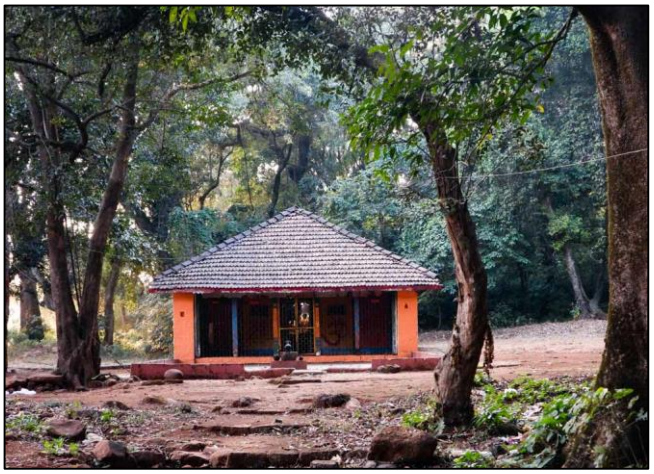
Western Yellow Wagtail

Plum-headed Parakeet

We witnessed how the Drongos and the Babblers were mobbing the Spotted Owlet. But the Owlet flew from one tree to the other and just stayed perched on the branch calmly, even though the Babblers and Drongos followed it to the other tree and continued mobbing.

Chandoli National Park

As a post conference plan, we opted for Chandoli National Park which is part of the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve in Satara District of Maharashtra, for a night's stay and a jungle safari in the morning. This park is on a hilly area and has a beauty of its own, with the Krishna River and a dam as good picnic spots, but is less crowded than any other National Park, and also with less garbage and littering.



A small temple stands guard over a sacred grove in Chandoli

Crimson-backed Sunbird

As our intention was birdwatching we focused the morning safari documenting and enjoying various bird calls like Crimson-backed Sunbird, White-cheeked Barbet, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Common Chiffchaff, Brown-cheeked Fulvetta and many more. With no wild animals to sight our birds made this safari worthwhile.

Common Woodshrike

White-bellied Drongo

Warna Dam and Ukhli Waterfalls

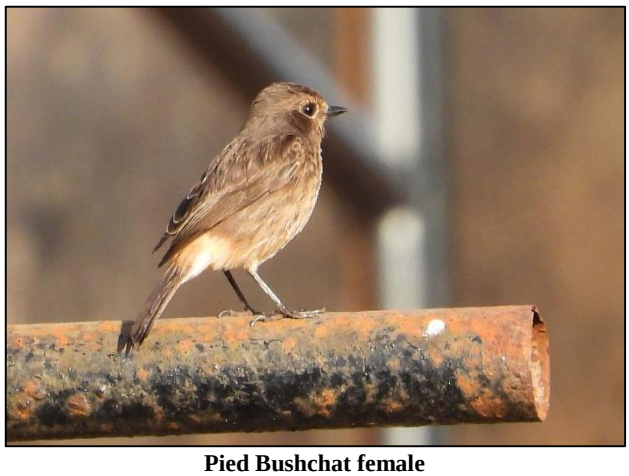
Ashy Drongo

Not fully satisfied with the Safari we all went to the nearby Warna Dam on River Krishna, and some surrounding areas, and were happy to spot Malabar Whistling Thrush, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Black Drongo, Ashy Drongo and Brahminy Kite. As the dam road was already at a height we were almost at eye level with many birds, and could get some great pictures from close range.

Brahminy Kite

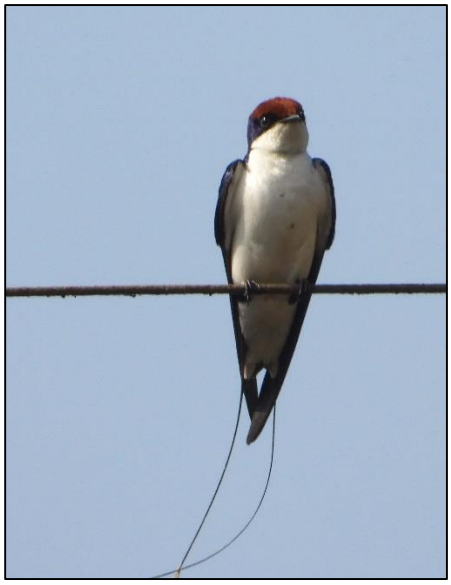
Mahabaleshwar, Wai and Panchgani

Red-whiskered Bulbul



Pied Bushchat female

Visiting the Western Ghats was one of our dreams and this trip gave us an entry to one of the biodiversity-rich hotspots of India. Being a tourist destination we chose Mahabaleshwar as our first place, not exclusively as a birding site – hence we were not that happy about our birding experience here, although we did spot Oriental Turtle Dove, Spot-breasted Fantail, Pied Bushchat, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Orange Minivet, Wire-tailed Swallow, Square-tailed Bulbul, and the very attractive Red-breasted Flycatcher. All through our journey here we could listen to the sweet birdsong of the Brown-cheeked Fulvetta but couldn't get to see this bird.



Wire-tailed Swallow

Little Egret

<u>Bhigwan Bird Sanctuary - In search of the Greater Flamingo</u>

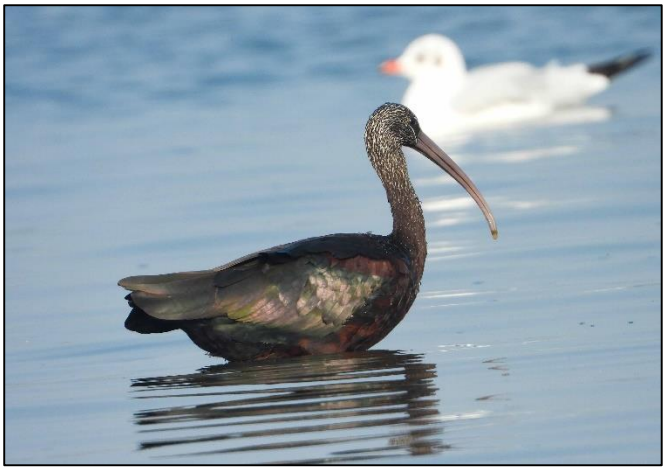
After Mahabaleshwar we visited Pune to catch up with friends and family. Our return journey to Hyderabad was via Solapur. Bhigwan Bird Sanctuary is on the way and we were following up on news of Flamingos and other migratory birds since a long time.

Painted Stork

Asian Green Bee-eater

Bhigwan is a paradise for water birds and for birders; the boat safari is a simply a pleasure ride. The moment you are at the backwaters of River Bhima, you are swamped with sights and sounds of birds from all over, so much so that you forget you are so close to the highway. The shore grassland invited us with a lot of small birds like Western Yellow Wagtail, Citrine Wagtail, Asian Green Bee-eater, Wire-tailed Swallow, etc.

Woolly-necked Stork



Glossy Ibis

Brown-headed Gull

Black-tailed Godwit

Once you are on the boat and you look in any direction, it's all birds and birds! It took us some time to identify most of the birds as half of them were lifers for us.

Apart from the regular birds – like Grey Heron, Purple Heron, Glossy Ibis, Painted Stork, Black-winged Stilt, Eurasian Coot, River Tern, Asian Openbill, Little Egret, Spot-billed Duck, Northern Pintail, Little Grebe, Ruddy Shelduck – we were amazed to see many others: Bar-headed Goose, Garganey, Northern Shoveler, Black-tailed Godwit, Wood Sandpiper, Slender-billed Gull, Pallas's Gull, Whiskered Tern, Laggar Falcon, etc. Our boat birding guide helped us with quickly identifying the birds.

Pallas's Gull

Northern Shoveler

Greater Flamingo

After almost an hour of birding in shallow waters we ventured into deep waters to reach a spot where we saw the Greater Flamingos. It was like a wish come true as all the visitors whether birders or just tourists come here to see the Flamingos, so there is some excitement and some mad rush to see these beautiful birds. We were at the same spot for almost half an hour observing these beautiful birds with very few getting into their pink plumage. It was simply meditative looking at them, but we had to leave the spot so as to make space for the other boats.

We left Bhigwan with a lot of satisfaction but again we were worried with so many visitors crowding the delicate grasslands and wetlands and littering the place with plastic wrappers and plastic water bottles. There was no one from the authorities to regulate the traffic, with the boatmen engaging every visitor to make the best use of the birding season.

Boramani Grasslands - Sanctuary of the Great Indian Bustard

A view of Boramani grasslands

This vast area in Solapur District of Maharashtra is part of the Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary, with beautiful grasslands and unique landscapes giving us a feeling of being in some African wildlife park. We were lucky to have the company of two locals – Rajkumar, a Bird Rescuer from Solapur, and Balasaheb, a Ph.D. scholar who was researching on the birds of this region, especially the Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark.

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse male

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse female

With their help we explored the whole habitat and spotted some bird species specific to this habitat, like Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, White-eyed Buzzard, Short-toed Snake-Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Eurasian Hoopoe, Paddyfield Pipit, Rufous-tailed Lark etc.

White-eyed Buzzard

Montagu's Harrier

Eurasian Hoopoe

On our way back we saw 2 herds of Blackbucks grazing and dancing at a distance. This place was one of the best habitats, almost untouched by human activities. The whole area is divided between government and private land with a huge land parcel dedicated to Solapur Airport. We hope and pray this grassland will remain a paradise for all the birds who are resident in this region as well as the migratory ones.

Bay-backed Shrike

Solapur is well known for temple tourism with the famous annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur. But the local birders and conservationists call this place as Pakshyanche Pandhari (Pilgrimage of Birds).

Plastic World

While visiting all these places we couldn't ignore the huge amount of garbage, trash and plastic waste all across the tourist spots, roads, rivers and valleys. As consumers we humans show total disregard to the other beings who also occupy the same earth and try to survive amongst us. In many places, too much human activity is leading to irreparable damage to the pristine hill stations. We checked the Air Quality Index at a few places and realized it is not at all healthy and pleasant. We were unhappy with how much damage we are doing to the very places we lovingly visit as tourists. While the local administration is regulating the damage by its own Waste Collection system, Pollution Tax, Green Tax etc some drastic change in our consumption and exploitative behavior is needed to be a responsible tourist.

Sustainable Tourism

We realised how important sustainable development and sustainable tourism is, with this trip. Rampant destruction in the name of tourism and development can lead to collapse of the place itself which will be a loss to tourism. We realised that the government is taking its measures, but ultimately it is us tourists who need to follow sustainable practices so as to maintain the sanctity of the place we are visiting. During our road trip we ensured we carried our own water bottle and never took a single packaged water bottle. We mostly ate fresh and local Maharashtrian food from small local hotels and even sometimes from roadside vendors. Whatever little trash we generated we carried in our own trash bag. We were aware and conscious of our fuel carbon footprint of nearly 2000 kms. We have decided to minimize this in our next expeditions by using public transport and car pooling as much as possible.

Some other photographs taken during the trip:

Common Kingfisher

Black-tailed Godwit flock

Brown-headed Gull

Little Ringed Plover

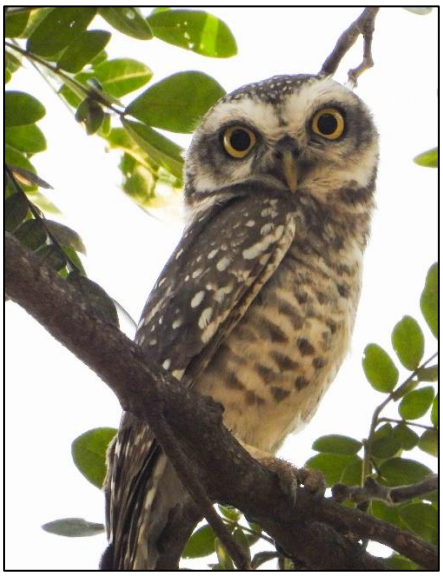
Greater Flamingo

Eurasian Spoonbill

Grey Heron

Black Kite

Indian Pond Heron



Spotted Owlet

Western Yellow Wagtail

Large Grey Babbler

Indian Robin male

Oriental Magpie Robin male

Northern Shoveler male

Western Yellow Wagtail

Red-wattled Lapwing

Pied Bushchat male

Indian White-eye

Asian Openbill

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Black-crested Bulbul (*Rubigula flaviventris*)

Black-crested Bulbul (Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, January 13, 2024)

Order: Passeriformes
Family: Pycnonotidae
Genus: *Rubigula*
Species: *R. flaviventris*
Size: 19-22 cm

Description & distribution: The Black-crested Bulbul, originally described in the genus Vanga, was later moved to genus Pycnonotus. However, once this genus was found to be polyphyletic (that is, a group having members with mixed evolutionary origins, but not including their most recent common ancestor) the Black-crested Bulbul, along with four other Bulbul species, was moved to genus Rubigula. Until 2008, the Black-crested Bulbul was considered a subspecies of a complex that included the Black-capped and Flame-throated Bulbuls (both seen in India), and the Ruby-throated and Bornean Bulbuls.

The Black-crested Bulbul has olive-green upperparts, yellow underparts and a glossy black head with a prominent crest. The face and throat are also glossy black, and irises are bright yellow. The sexes are alike. Juveniles are similar but duller in colour, and have a smaller crest.

The Black-crested Bulbul is seen across most of the lower Himalayas from Himachal Pradesh east to Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Manipur, and south to some parts of eastern Madhya Pradesh, northern Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. Eight sub-species are recognized, of which only *R. f. flaviventris* is seen in India.

Habitat & behaviour: The Black-crested Bulbul is usually seen singly or in pairs or small groups, in bushes and lower storey of open forests, secondary scrub forest, at the edges of forests, in orchards or in shrubbery around cultivation, both near and away from human habitation. It is mainly frugivorous, but may also pick up insects occasionally. It has a very pleasant call, somewhat similar to the Red-whiskered Bulbul. The song is very sweet and musical, and goes *weet-tre-trippy-weet*, with no harsh notes.

Nesting: The Black-crested Bulbul breeds generally between January and June. The nest is a cup of fine twigs, rootlets, grass etc, often bound with cobwebs, and usually placed fairly low in a bush or small tree. The usual clutch consists of 2-4 reddish white eggs, blotched with various shares of red. Both parents participate in nest-building, incubation and care of the young ones.

Local name: The Black-crested Bulbul is known as *'Zard bulbul'* or *'Haldi bulbul'* in Hindi, *'Mandiphur'* in Lepcha, *'Pahariya kangdhara'* in Gorakhpur and *'Hagrani dao-bulip'* in Cachari.

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